# GETTING PERSONAL
## HOW BIOSECURITY GETS UNDER OUR SKIN

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The term security has acquired such breadth and been remoulded so often that it can start to seem meaningless. It is the mantra that will be invoked to justify human rights infringements or to start a war, but also the term that includes 'climate' and 'energy' issues. How does it encompass so much and why does it mobilise such power? A book review of Frédéric Gros's book which outlines the mind-changing concept of biosecurity.

L ooking at the word afresh is a guaranteed result of Frédéric Gros's book *Le Principe Sécurité* (The Principle Security, 2012). Gros is a French philosopher, Michel Foucault expert, and author of the bestseller *A Philosophy of Walking* (2014). No less intellectually stimulating and philosophical for being a readable ride through history, Gros sets out a Foucauldian-style genealogy of the concept of security. He sets out what he calls its four main usages, contextualising them within their historic Western origins, and ending with biosecurity (a nascent, under-theorised Foucauldian concept that Gros defines anew).

One of the book's most intriguing elements is how Gros conceives these four disparate senses of security to interact with each other, and how they disappear and re-emerge, modernised and updated to the situation, throughout time and space. Most salient is the way he maps out the increasing importance of biosecurity and its contradictory, potent synthesis with other senses of security to make up our current notion of security.

## PEACE OF MIND

Gros's first sense of security transports the reader back to third century Rome and Greece. This concept is closely related to *ataraxia*: a concept central to Epicurean, Stoic, and Sceptic schools of thought, which means "security of spirit/mind justified or not in a situation where there could be cause for fear". Security here is a subjective state of mind, a stable and imperturbable attitude of serenity, achieved through arduous and never-ending mental exercises.

It is embodied by the image of the quintessential sage, head held high and serene amongst the swirling tempests of life, resolutely unaffected by external circumstances be they political upheaval, personal trauma, or abject poverty. This section is reminiscent of currently popular techniques such as meditation and mindfulness, and their aims of peace of mind and inner equilibrium.

## THE SUNDAY OF HISTORY

Gros's next chapter is abundant in engrossing historical detail. It describes his second sense of security: the objective absence of harm. This idea is traced back to millenarianism, which emerged in the early Middle Ages; a belief rooted in Christianity of the coming of a period of one thousand years of sublime and total peace and plenty, before judgement day. In this utopic period, the earth will be fertile, everyone will have enough, the world will be unified,

Jesus would walk amongst and lead the living, and exploitation and cruelty would cease.

Here, security is a future time period, one which is both historically written in the stars yet needs to be catalysed in some way. Many smaller crusades in the eleventh century attempted to spark it by reaching Jerusalem, such as the People's Crusade, made up of a rabble of desperate and landless peasants, and the poignant 30 000-strong Children's Crusade. This belief resurfaces throughout the medieval period in the West with the idea of the coming of the last emperor who would unite the land and rule justly. It is about achieving the next stage of history – indeed, the 'end of history' where the earth is unified in one (Christian) Empire. It stands out for its political basis, its critique of the status quo, and its imagining of a more equal future. Many small yet disruptive millenarian movements, such as the Franciscans, driven by a desire to rid the world of evil and critical of inequality and church corruption, were brutally repressed. These movements were doubly threatening to the powers that be for promising a better life on this earth – a 'heaven on earth'. According to some historians, the Catholic Church's denial and repression of this ideology contributed to the supplanting of religion in people's hearts by twentieth century materialist visions of a better world. People were given little hope of a better life in this world, so gradually moved to an espousal of ideologies which promised this, such as communism.

*THE HUMAN IS A "BIOLOGICAL FINITUDE", A PHYSIOLOGICAL ENTITY RATHER THAN A POLITICAL SUBJECT*

## THE STATE OF SECURITY

From being wholly absent in the previous meanings (indeed the bounded nation state is contrary to the idea of a global Empire), the state and its apparatus take centre stage in this concept, embodying security through three figures: the policeman, the judge, and the soldier, representing respectively the protection of citizens and their property, their civil rights, and territorial integrity. Here Gros excavates the idea of security as one and the same as the state, from liberal thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau and their notions of 'the state of nature' and the social contract, through which another part of human 'nature' is fulfilled (human beings' presumed need for 'natural laws', intrinsic to them, such as equality and liberty). What stands out is Gros's deconstruction of this idea – so often taken for granted – which intrinsically ties security to the state. Security is thus a powerful state, with strong and effective police, judiciary, and military branches. However, the judicial branch of this security is today increasingly left by the wayside as the police and the military dominate, such as during infinitely extended states of emergency when civil rights are suspended. These two senses also gradually merge, as internal policing becomes more militarised (especially in relation to protest and policing minorities), and enemies of the states are perceived to be inside the state (such as terrorists).

## BIOSECURITY

These concepts appear to cover all the bases of security as we know it. What, then, is biosecurity? This slippery and little known concept has nevertheless been embedded in society for the last couple of decades, according to Gros. Security here is the "continuity of a process" – the tracing and monitoring of auto-regulated flows, be they flows of humans, of goods, of capital, and so on. The important thing to grasp here is the auto-regulatory nature of these flows. Energy security, for example, entails ensuring the regularity of a flux that must spread continuously and evenly through a territory, through the diversification of energy sources, geopolitical calculations, investment in renewable energy, and so on.

Biosecurity entails protection, control, and regulation. The protection aspect of biosecurity conceives of the human as vulnerable and permeable, reduced to her "most basic biological substrate" – physical wants, fears, and needs. In other words, the human is first and foremost a "biological finitude", a physiological entity rather than a political subject; a living entity who makes up populations of feeding, breathing, moving, suffering bodies, rather than a group of active citizens. Security is therefore redefined as the securing of the "vital nucleus of life" of this human. This transforms the scope of what is considered a security issue to anything which impinges on the wellbeing of this vital nucleus; it results in a "semantic explosion" of the word, which can now encompass climate, food, energy, migration, information, and more.

## A GLOBAL COMMUNITY OF VICTIMS

On an international level this view of protection of the human, unseats the traditional realist centring of the state as the main actor in international relations and reframes the objective of international institutions to 'human security', which encompasses poverty, gender discrimination, racial discrimination, unemployment, ecological problems, and so on. This can be seen in the increasing involvement of international institutions within these arenas, and the language of 'vulnerable populations',

the protection of which is the justification for military interventions under norms such as Responsibility to Protect. Gros damningly describes this as a move from respect to compassion; the creation of a "global community of victims". Indeed, we can see here a certain decontextualisation and dehistoricising of a political situation and the people affected by it, to just generic and homogeneous biological beings. This has also led to the mainstreaming of what some have called the 'precautionary principle', whereby the risk of harm to the population requires large-scale measures unless proved otherwise, reversing the burden of proof (a narrative, Gros argues, also perpetuated by the climate change discourse). We can also see echoes of something akin to the 'risk society'. Moreover, the human's own auto-regulated body is put at risk by the increasingly globalised flows of goods, people, food, which could contain dangerous pathogens.

## MUTUALISED CONTROL

The control part of biosecurity perceives these human bodies as also uniquely genetically identifiable and localisable, whilst surveillance changes from being centralised and hierarchical to being "democratic, reticulated (reticulé), participative, privatised". Our communications, movements, web searches, purchases,are recorded, stored, and tied to various profiles (from consumer to security profiles), retrievable at any moment, but it is spread around many

sources; not only companies such as phone operators and airlines but individuals too. This horizontal twenty-first century surveillance is not top-down; instead we 'surveille' each other to create "a community of watchers" with "mutualised control" where everyone's whereabouts, purchases, interests, are available to others (for example, the Find my Friend app allows you to geolocate your friend's phone if you allow them to do the same).

Anyone having read Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* would find it well described here. Eggers' novel is set within a gargantuan and hip social media platform which slowly incorporates more and more aspects of people's lives into it – from buying everything through it, to voting, to organising everything – crescendoing into a compulsory and manic collective voyeurism, in which everyone (including politicians) is constantly visible, available, sharing, and connecting (though all, crucially, controlled by the platform). Gros's analysis of this is as a rejection of doubt and uncertainty: "To secure the world is to deliver it from hesitations, opacity, doubts of conscience and of words.". Indeed, this is key to his theory – drawing on Foucault's overused yet no less true quote that 'knowledge is power' – which underlines the overseeing, watching, and recording of flows and processes. Traceability is at the core of Gros's theory. The loci of biosecurity are not borders and doors – like that of state security which is about enclosing – but crossroads for

flux such as airports where these can be monitored, labelled, recorded. Biosecurity measures relating to 'food security', for example, imply the meticulous and multi-levelled following of food across the world and across borders, by tagging and recording and following the whole process in order to know providence, journey, quality, status etc.

## DIY REGULATION

Gros stresses the centrality of auto-regulation; the fluxes and flows are balanced and recalibrate or readjust organically according to inner needs and to outer circumstances – they are reactive. They can be thrown off kilter by outside human interference, so security consists in managing and following them. Just like the human body, they may need subtle curation, but no direct or alien interference. Regulation is about the "management of a milieu" then, rather than repression or direct imposition. And this management is not done by a centralised state authority, but, as explained above, by a democratised and organic process. This is how biosecurity takes us beyond Orwellian surveillance or the tension between rights, as in the freedom versus security debate. There is no imposition or repression; human will, human agency, does not enter the equation. The debate is centred around mobile packages of skin and bones and their physical needs and desires, and the management of the ideal way to secure their wellbeing.

*BIOSECURITY TAKES US BEYOND ORWELLIAN SURVEILLANCE OR THE TENSION BETWEEN RIGHTS, AS IN THE FREEDOM VERSUS SECURITY DEBATE; THERE IS NO IMPOSITION OR REPRESSION*

This idea of auto-regulation, Gros argues, has permeated how liberal economists conceptualise the market. Capital is seen as a flow and the market is conceived like a living body, with internal processes and fluxes which auto-regulate perfectly to be prosperous; it is "an island of naturality to preserve". The only way to maintain the prosperity and functioning of the market is therefore to remove barriers to its sponta- neous and natural regulation. The principle of auto-regulation of the market is what makes it perceived as 'infallible'; prices on unregulated markets are 'true' as they haven't been polluted by alien interference. If a market is free – that's security; it hasn't been tainted by arbitrary and brutal laws, and by blind and flawed political will. Gros calls this the "utopia of securitising auto-regulation". Neoliberalism has extended this logic into an entrenched and seemingly common sense dogma claiming everything is better run without interference, on an unregulated market.

## A POTENT POTION

As we know, state-centred security still very much shapes our world today, yet is modified to fit biosecurity's increasingly ubiquitous logic. This leads to the strange tension of the state's military and police functions being seen as necessary but being transplanted from the public to the private domain, for example in the increasing privatisa- tion of military and police forces, from private contractors in armed interventions, to private companies such as G4S managing prisons. Biosecurity shapes our understanding of economics and politics and the place of humans within these realms. Migration may still be conceptualised as a national borders issue, and rising nationalist parties certainly ascribe to the nation state the unique power of dealing with the issue, but migration is mainly seen as a flow, full of living beings who need to be recorded, classified, and followed, and whose physiological needs must be managed. Biosecurity, Gros seems to be implying, is fundamentally about depoliticisation: the markets, populations, flows of goods, capital should not be subject

to the destabilising effect of human influence. Security is just the natural continuation of existing processes; Gros for this reason states that security is "everything continuing like it was before". Security is leaving in place the systems fostering ecological destruction andrisingsocial inequality. These areas are removed from the purview of democratic and political will, of human free will and agency. Humans are at once atomised and de-individualised into 'populations'.

How biosecurity interacts with other senses of security today is another debate; mindfulness and 'wellbeing' as increasingly institutionalised and business-led can be looked at through the lens of managing humans' wellbeing within the context of an anxiety-inducing 'risk society' which centres itself around risk and how to manage and prevent it.

Some critiques may be levelled at Gros, such as the stark lack of structural or class analysis. Considering his critique that biosecurity 'dehumanises' and removes human will from the equation, his own analysis, situated well within poststructuralism, fails to engage with the human wills, power dynamics, and structures that create and perpetuate these different senses of security. The omission of security in the sense of 'social security' – social protection and welfare systems – is surprising, though he might class this under biosecurity.

Yet Gros's book is rich, accessible, and key reading for anyone wishing to look under the surface of our society and unpack one of its most powerful political concepts. He spins a historically engaging and contemporarily important account of what security in its various shapes means today. By defamiliarising processes and ways of talking and of acting that we take for granted, he achieves what is surely every academic's aim: to make us look at the world with new eyes.



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